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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

AN AMERICAN MASTERWORK¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

MR. Sherwood Anderson's extraordinary book, *The Triumph of the Egg*, labors under two handicaps. In the first place, it has won a prize—an actual hard-cash prize of \$2,000 offered by *The Dial* for the best American book of the year, to be awarded in recognition of the service rendered to letters by some young American writer; and the usual quality of prize-winning novels, poems, plays, operas, symphonies, is known to all. In the second place, Mr. Anderson's book deals frankly and veraciously with the human scene—specifically, with the American scene. Under the double handicap thus indicated, is it any wonder that two varieties of readers are indisposed toward *The Triumph of the Egg*?—those who, being wary and experienced, cannot help shying at the kind of art that wins prizes; and those who are distressed by too sustained a display of intellectual and imaginative veracity.

We may dispose of the first matter—a serious potential prejudice—by the assurance that, according to the usual standards operative in the awarding of prizes for æsthetic endeavor, Mr. Anderson's book would not have had a chance in the world: for it flouts—or rather it quietly ignores—all of the conventionalized, institutionalized criteria that are influential in such cases. But it happens, wonderfully enough, that this particular contest was guided by sensitive, intelligent, and singularly courageous standards. The donors honored themselves in honoring Mr. Anderson. There remains the handicap imposed by the remorseless veracity of Mr. Anderson's book—a thing which cannot so easily or so quickly be condoned. Let us consider Mr. Anderson's achievement as leisurely and calmly as may be.

¹ *The Triumph of the Egg*. By Sherwood Anderson. New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc.

The Triumph of the Egg bears this sub-title: *A Book of Impressions from American Life in Tales and Poems*. The poems consist of a two-part prologue and an epilogue, and may be set aside for the moment. The "tales" are thirteen in number, and, with a single and negligible exception, they are precisely what the author calls them: "impressions from American life"—satirical, farcical, tragical, allegorical, idyllic; but all of them are profoundly grave and profoundly poignant. To the casual eye, the book is a collection of unrelated sketches and tales, with one novelette filling about a third of the space. But this is not essentially their character. The parts form a unified whole; not through identity of characters or unity of place or continuity of action, but because, as Mr. Robert Morss Lovett has happily said of them, "they answer to each other like the movements of a *symphonie pathétique*, combining to give a single reading of life, a sense of its immense burden, its pain, its dreariness, its futile aspiration, its despair."

These impressions, tales, sketches, parables, fantasies—call them what you choose—conform to a certain kind of contemporary music rather than to the kind of writing that usually goes into American fiction. In certain of these pieces—for example, in *The Man in the Brown Coat*—the effect is curiously like that achieved by Stravinsky or Bloch or Schönberg or Ornstein in one of those haunting and intangible projections in tone which hold the quintessence of an experience. Mr. Anderson uses words with a strange and baffling magic. He uses them in such a way that they shed, slowly and almost imperceptibly, their familiar associations, and take on the unspecific, unshackled expressional quality of the tones of blended and complementary instrumental voices, weaving a musical pattern vaguely, delicately, but most potently evocative. And he does this by no elaborate and cunning effects of iridescence or the subtle interplay of rhythms and verbal tone-colors. The texture of his prose is as a rule curiously plain and humble, though sometimes it becomes piercingly lyrical, sometimes austere and almost processional. His words fly to their mark by the aid of a kind of elliptical speech more daring and subtle even than anything attempted by Meredith or Conrad or Henry James—an ellipsis that, again, has us back to the

methods and achievements of a certain type of modern music, with its disuse of transitional framework and its concentration upon essentials.

It is by the aid of this plastic, sensitive, liberated order of verbal indication that he is able to accomplish the kind of revelatory utterance that distinguishes his art. It is a remarkable kind of legerdemain that he exerts—the legerdemain of a mystic, a symbolist, a fantaisiste. His prose is a genuine incantation. His words drift and sway before us, and we perceive hidden, disquieting images of reality. He is a naturalist doubled by a mystic: he is both seer and poet; and out of the drab, pitiful, terrible subject-matter of his tales—tales of trivial, gross, stunted, frustrated, joyless, ugly and twisted human lives—he is able to disclose to us, in revelation after revelation, the human actuality of these poor beings; the infinite pitifulness of these souls who are ourselves. Mr. Anderson is one of those profoundly understanding and clairvoyant artists who are able, by virtue of their sensibility and their compassion and their implacable candor, to tear away what Pater called that “veil of the familiar” which falls between man and his experiences, and which falls also between man and his fellows.

Mr. Anderson, like Maeterlinck, like Dostoievsky, like Tchekhov, is determined to call us back to the contemplation of these mysteries. He holds—rationally or intuitively—that fundamental assumption of the mystic’s creed: which is (said one of the most delicately perceptive of them) the assumption “of undercurrents in life, of lives within lives”; of, too, “the permanent, essential correspondence of life with life that must exist between the conception which emanates from man’s spirit and the image of it which emanates from nature, animate or inanimate.” The unspeakable loneliness of the soul, its immitigable detachment and yet its pathetic dependence, speak everywhere out of these intolerably poignant histories. “The spirit of the man who had killed his wife”—says the narrator in the tragic tale called *Brothers*—“came into the body of the little old man there by the roadside. It was striving to tell me the story it would never be able to tell in the court-room in the city, in the presence of the judge. The whole story of mankind’s loneliness, of the effort to reach out

to unattainable beauty, tried to get itself expressed from the lips of a mumbling old man, crazed with loneliness, who stood by the side of a country road on a foggy morning holding a little dog in his arms. . . . A sort of convulsion shook his body. The soul seemed striving to wrench itself out of the body, to fly away through the fog, down across the plain to the city, to the singer, the politician, the millionaire, the murderer, . . . down in the city. . . . 'We are brothers,' he said—'we have different names, but we are brothers.'” Like Rosalind Wescott in *Out of Nowhere into Nothing*, Mr. Anderson has ever before him that vision of the young girl, with swinging arms and shoulders, going down the stairway, “down into the hidden places in people, into the hall of the little voices. ‘I shall understand after this; what shall I not understand?’ she asked herself.”

LeRoy, walking and talking beside the lake in *Seeds*, muses somberly. “I have seen under the shell of life, and I am afraid,” he says. Mr. Anderson is afraid, too, but he is afraid only because of his dread lest he may not be able to make us see what he has seen—that these human histories may baffle him, elude him, address him in vain. He is afraid of his own limitations as communicant, as interpreter; and he makes this confession in his prologue:

Tales are people who sit on the doorstep of the house of my mind.
It is cold outside and they sit waiting.
I look out at a window.

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The street before the door of the house of my mind is filled with tales.
They murmur and cry out, they are dying of cold and hunger.

I am a helpless man—my hands tremble.
I should be sitting on a bench like a tailor.
I should be weaving warm cloth out of the threads of thought.
The tales should be clothed.
They are freezing on the doorstep of the house of my mind.

I am a helpless man—my hands tremble.
I feel in the darkness but cannot find the doorknob.
I look out at a window.
Many tales are dying in the street before the house of my mind.

But he is only relatively "helpless". The tales, many of them, *are* clothed—wonderfully clothed. And they live for us unforgettably. Mr. Anderson has something of Maeterlinck's inestimable power of evocation, his ability to make us see, in a gesture or an inflection or a trivial act of recognition or refusal, the spiritual panorama of a whole life, an entire generation. These human Tales are observed, transfixed, set before us with a sobriety, a perfection of truth, a justness and tenderness of notation, an exquisite rectitude, for which it is not easy to find a parallel in fiction. A lesser, a grosser artist could not have touched such material without degrading it by sentimentalism or by travesty. Mr. Anderson is as austere as he is tender; he is, indeed, so fine, so scrupulous an artist that there is no degree of revelation, however bitter or devastating or terrible, which betrays him into a lapse of integrity.

This book—a great book, a very great book—is suffused with an almost unbearable poignancy. Some will not perhaps be ready to grant that it is also rich in beauty. In these transcriptions Mr. Anderson has achieved a beauty that irradiates his page. It is a beauty "wrought from within," wrought from a boundless compassion. For, viewing that importunate company of embodied Tales, he knows that they, that we, are travesties, distortions, anomalies. "To be sure she is a grotesque," says his LeRoy of the Iowa woman in the Chicago lodging-house; "but then all the people in the world are grotesques. We all need to be loved. What would cure her would cure the rest of us also. The disease she had is, you see, universal. We all want to be loved and the world has no plan for creating our lovers."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.